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ABSTRACT

Judy Harapiak is a teacher who provides her middle years students with many opportunities to respond to stories in different ways, to reflect on their responses, and to link their reading to their own experiences as well as to other areas of the curriculum. She teaches a grade four-five-six class in the Elementary Alternative Education Program (which is based on a belief in the value of a student-centered, activity-based, thematic approach to learning) at Montrose School in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. In this classroom setting, Judy introduces her students to Eleanor Coerr's story "Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes," a story of a 12-year-old Japanese girl who tried to complete 1000 paper cranes to heal her leukemia that she contracted after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Judy begins the literature study by drawing her students' attention to the title and cover illustration of the short novel. She helps her students extend their responses to the novel by drawing attention to such elements as character and setting. Drama and role playing are introduced as a way for students to enter imaginatively into the story. Visitors to the classroom help students make real connections to a world beyond the pages of the novel. Through active involvement in their own learning, literature comes alive for students as they discover the interconnectedness of stories, readers, and the world beyond books. (A figure illustrating the connections made to the world beyond the book is included.) (RS)

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Reading Stories: Responding to Literature and Making Connections Across the Curriculum

by

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INSIGHTS into open education

Reading Stories: Responding to Literature and Making Connections Across the Curriculum

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More and more, teachers are realizing the importance of teaching literature for its own sake, and not just as a motivating way to teach and practice reading skills. And more and more, teachers are beginning to understand that the follow up to reading a story or a novel has to be more than just a summary of the plot, and a series of comprehension questions to be answered by students. Literature invites reaction and response, and Rosenblatt's (1976, 1978, 1988) transactional theory of reader response has given classroom teachers a greater awareness of the ways in which readers experience texts, the ways in which readers bring meaning to texts, and the ways in which they take meaning from texts. Teachers of literature have come to understand that it is their task to focus on this transaction between the reader and the text, and to deepen and extend this meaning making literary experience for students.

But often, teachers themselves have had little experience transacting with a text, and are unsure of their own literary insights. So, following the reading of a story or novel, a discussion of comprehension questions seems safer. Consequently, literature study becomes an efferent, fact-accumulating process, rather than an aesthetic experience. In her writings about response to literature, Rosenblatt (1978) distinguishes between efferent and aesthetic reading, and reminds us that aesthetic reading is most often neglected in schools. In efferent reading the reader looks for facts and information to draw from a text. An efferent reading stance is most frequently adopted for content area reading, and follow up questions that focus on comprehension are quite appropriate in conjunction with the reading of social studies textbooks, health textbooks, or reference books. In aesthetic reading, however, the focus is on what Rosenblatt (1976, 1978) refers to as a lived-through evocation of the text—or the process in which readers select out ideas, sensations, feelings, and images from their past linguistic, literary, and life experiences, and synthesize them into a new experience.

A good book can be very powerful, and can deeply affect the life of its reader. What happens to all of us when we are impressed by a book is that we want to talk about it. We have undergone an experience and we want to discuss it in order to understand it more clearly. We want to share it with others. Children respond to stories in the same way. Their initial response to literature, and the questions they ask about literature most often reflect an aesthetic reading stance. It is up to teachers, then, to nurture this natural response to stories and to establish a classrom environment that invites an aesthetic reading of literature. Teachers can do this by the way in which literature is presented, by the kinds of questions they ask during story time, and by the types of discussion they encourage. David Bleich (1975), a reader response theorist who is very interested in the classroom application of reading theories,

has developed a basic set of questions, intended not to glean facts and information from a reading, but rather, to evoke feelings and encourage an affective transaction with the text. Using Bleich's approach, teachers might frame their questions for students in this way:

1. What details or features of the story stand out the most?
2. How does the story make you feel?
3. Does the story remind you of any experience you've had, or of any other work you've read?

It is evident from the nature of these questions that Bleich's technique can be applied equally well to any story, and at any reading level. A variation of this approach is to ask students to close their eyes and picture the story or passage they have just heard or read. If the teacher then asks students to talk about which pictures from the story come most clearly into their minds, each child will have a different image and will speak of different things. The many different responses to these questions can then form the basis for group discussions, where students listen to the thoughts of others, learn from others, and reflect on their own initial responses to a story. As students gain confidence in their ability to respond to a story, the teacher continues to extend and deepen the students' interactions with the text by encouraging them to evaluate the story and the characters, to examine the author's style, to link their reading to other books and characters, and to think critically about all they encounter in the pages of a text.

Judy Harapiak is a teacher who provides her middle years students with many such opportunities to respond to stories in different ways, to reflect on their responses, and to link their reading to their own experiences as well as to other areas of the curriculum. Judy teaches a grade four-five-six class in the Elementary Alternative Education Program at Montrose School in Winnipeg, Canada. Montrose School houses several alternative classrooms and Judy Harapiak and Diane Zack are the two teachers responsible for the grade four-five-six alternative program.

The Alternative Education Program is based on a belief in the value of a student-centered, activity-based, thematic approach to learning. In each classroom there are children with a grade span of three years, working collaboratively to investigate topics and to learn through discussion, research, and hands-on activities. Parents are involved in the day-to-day activities of the program and welcomed in the classroom. Students are encouraged to become responsible for their own learning and to transact in meaningful ways with the real world around them and the world of books before them.

It is in this classroom setting that Judy introduces her students to Eleanor Coerr's story, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. This is the story of Sadako Sasaki who was only twelve years old when she died. She was two when an atom bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima in Japan, where she lived. Ten years later she had leukemia as a result of radiation from the bomb. While in the hospital, Sadako began making a thousand paper cranes, hoping thereby to heal herself. In Japanese mythology the crane is the symbol of life, and to make a thousand cranes would mean that her wish would be granted and she would be well again. But Sadako could only make 644 cranes before she died. Her classmates then folded 356 cranes so that one thousand could be buried with her. They also collected Sadako's letters and published them in a book, which is widely read in Japan. Sadako became a heroine to the children of Japan and a statue of Sadako

was erected in the Hiroshima Peace Park as a monument to her and to all children who were killed by the atom bomb. Sadako now stands on top of a granite mountain, holding a golden crane in outstretched hands. She represents all those children who lost their lives, and the inscription at the base of the statue speaks for all these children: "This is our cry, this is our prayer; peace in the world." Now, visitors from all over the world leave paper cranes at Sadako's memorial in the Hiroshima Peace Park, and every year on August 6, Peace Day, the children of Japan and children from all over the world honor Sadako and remember her wish by sending cranes to be placed beneath her statue.

In Canada, as in the United States, November 11 is designated as a day to remember those who died in war, and to celebrate the hope of peace. Therefore, Judy chose the month of November to introduce *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* to her students. Through friends and through the generosity of the Japanese Consulate, she was able to accumulate an assortment of Japanese posters, pictures, calendars, fans, and even a kimono. After school one day, these were all arranged about the room, so that when the students arrived the next morning, the new decor immediately created a sense of anticipation. It conveyed a feeling of Japanese culture. It generated excitement and drew students into the activity of the new book about to be read. Eventually, as the literature study continued and extended into the other areas of the curriculum, the results of the children's own activities and investigations were also displayed. And soon the complexity of the classroom's decor reflected the complex interweavings of the theme of peace in Sadako's story, with the students' new learnings about Japan, about peace efforts in other countries, about health, about science, geography, technology, art, drama, music, and physical education.

Judy begins the literature study by drawing her students' attention to the title of the book, pointing out that the selection of a title is a very important decision for an author, and asking students to think about the author's choice of a title for this short novel. Then students are asked to look at the cover illustration. Meaningful literature study generally moves from reading, to interpretation, to criticism, and the study of art follows similar stages. In order to understand and appreciate visual communication, Feldman (1970) suggests a procedure suitable for classroom discussions of art reproductions and illustrations. The first stage of the procedure is to have students describe everything they see in the work of art, all the colors, shapes, and objects. In Judy's class this means that students look carefully at every detail of the cover illustration of *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*. The next step is to analyze the relationships between the various parts of the illustration, by answering questions such as "Do certain shapes or colors seem to predominate?" or "Does any one object seem to be more important than others?" or "Are the figures looking at or touching each other?". In this way students begin to gain an understanding of how a mood or feeling is evoked through visual communication, and how this knowledge might inform their predictions about the contents of the book. Because each student comes to the work with a different set of experiences, expectations, and associations, responses to the illustration vary. Generally, however, the only sense in which an interpretation could be considered incorrect is when it is completely inconsistent with the visual information presented. Just as Bleich (1975) and Rosenblatt (1976, 1978, 1988) encourage readers to bring their feelings and background knowledge to a text in order to make meaning of the printed marks on the page, the Feldman (1970) approach encourages a similar process in order to advance students' visual literacy.

The classroom decor, the title of the book, with its unusual words, the students' predictions, based on their different interpretations of the cover illustration—all of these heighten their eagerness to begin reading. Judy reads the first chapter to the class and then students go off to read on their own or in small groups. Reading groups sit at round tables to facilitate interaction, and conversational exchanges about the story are encouraged. Students comment on characters and events, offer their predictions and share their interpretations.

Judy then helps her students to extend their responses to the novel by drawing their attention to such elements of story as character and setting. During the reading of the first chapter she directs her students to pay close attention to those descriptive phrases and sentences that might help them form a mental landscape of the story's setting. Then students draw pictures or create murals to show their understanding of the setting and to highlight what for them were its most vivid features. Art is used again when discussion turns to Sadako's character. The class as a whole brainstorms for words that would describe the kind of person Sadako is. Each student is drawn to different qualities of her character and each chooses a different method to convey what Sadako means to him or her. Some students choose to describe Sadako by cutting pictures and words from magazines to create a collage representative of her character. While some choose art as the medium for their response, others turn to poetry and write cinquains that describe Sadako. Still others choose to write letters to Sadako. They write about their feelings after having read the book. They share some of their own sad experiences with her and tell her of their thoughts about peace.

Besides many opportunities to extend and enrich their reading through art and writing, drama and role playing are also introduced as a way for student to enter imaginatively into the story. As a response to chapter four, where the secret of Sadako's illness is revealed, students are introduced to an activity based on De Bono's (1987) *Six Thinking Hats*. This activity gives students further opportunities to explore their feeling responses to the story, and to recognize that there can be many different yet authentic responses to a story, situation, or character. In this activity students wear colored paper hats to signal the role they are playing as they respond to the news of Sadako's illness. The student wearing a white hat is neutral in his or her report of Sadako's illness, presenting only facts and information to the group, offering no opinions, assumptions, or conclusions. The red hat is the counterpart to the white hat. The student in the red hat is emotional and subjective in his or her reporting, voicing impressions, hunches, and feelings. The green hat represents inventiveness and creative thinking, and the student wearing the green hat looks for alternative explanations when reporting on Sadako's illness. The green hat dares to think differently, to reverse the usual pattern of things and to formulate new possibilities. The black hat represents the pessimist who points out in a very rational way, without being argumentative, the seriousness of Sadako's situation, the inevitability of her death, and the foolishness of those who hold out hope for her. The wearer of the yellow hat is positive in his or her perceptions and assessments, looking for ways of dealing with the problem, downplaying the bad news, generating concrete suggestions, counteracting criticisms and negative interpretations from black hats, and basing a generally positive outlook on facts rather than on the hunches and emotional responses of those wearing red hats.

In groups, and wearing De Bono's hats, students interpret the news of Sadako's

illness according to the role demanded by their hat color. As they become involved in reporting and defending their positions, they enter into the story, move around inside it, and begin to realize that there is no one right response to literature. They begin to recognize that what they as readers bring to the story is as important as what the text contributes. The personal nature of the literary experience then becomes real for them.

Real connections are also made to a world beyond the pages of the book (see Figure 1 for a map of possible activities). A recent immigrant from Japan visits the class to teach students the art of origami and students make cranes to honor Sadako's dream for peace (see Tempko, 1974, for origami patterns). The visitor talks about Japan, students ask questions, and soon they are exploring elements of science, health, math, social studies, and physical education—all relating to Japan, and evolving from Sadako's story. Mapping skills become important as Hiroshima is located. Some students investigate the science of the atomic bomb and radiation. A representative of the local Cancer Society visits the class to speak about leukemia and the side effects of radiation. Another visitor, recently returned from teaching in Japan, talks to the class about Japanese schools, and this prompts a comparative examination of Canada and Japan: their histories, their landforms, their people, their customs, governments, and industries. Math activities enter the research as weather and population are graphed and relative living space in the two countries is calculated. Triumphs in technology are recorded as students investigate Japanese contributions to the automobile and electronics industries. Soon the room is filled with the results of the students' work: their maps, graphs, poems, letters, reports, models, and art creations. And when they leave their classroom to go to the gym, the connection to Japan continues, as a guest in the physical education class explains sumo wrestling and teaches students the rudiments of the martial arts.

The possible responses to a story, and the number of ways a story can be connected to different subject areas are limited only by the children's imagination and the teacher's energy to support their ideas. Encouraging children to read aesthetically calls for a more reader-centered approach to literature study and suggests an emotionally and intellectually more active role for children as they read stories, respond to them, and explore beyond them, right across the curriculum. Through this active involvement in their own learning, literature comes alive for students as they discover the interconnectedness of stories, readers, and the world beyond books.

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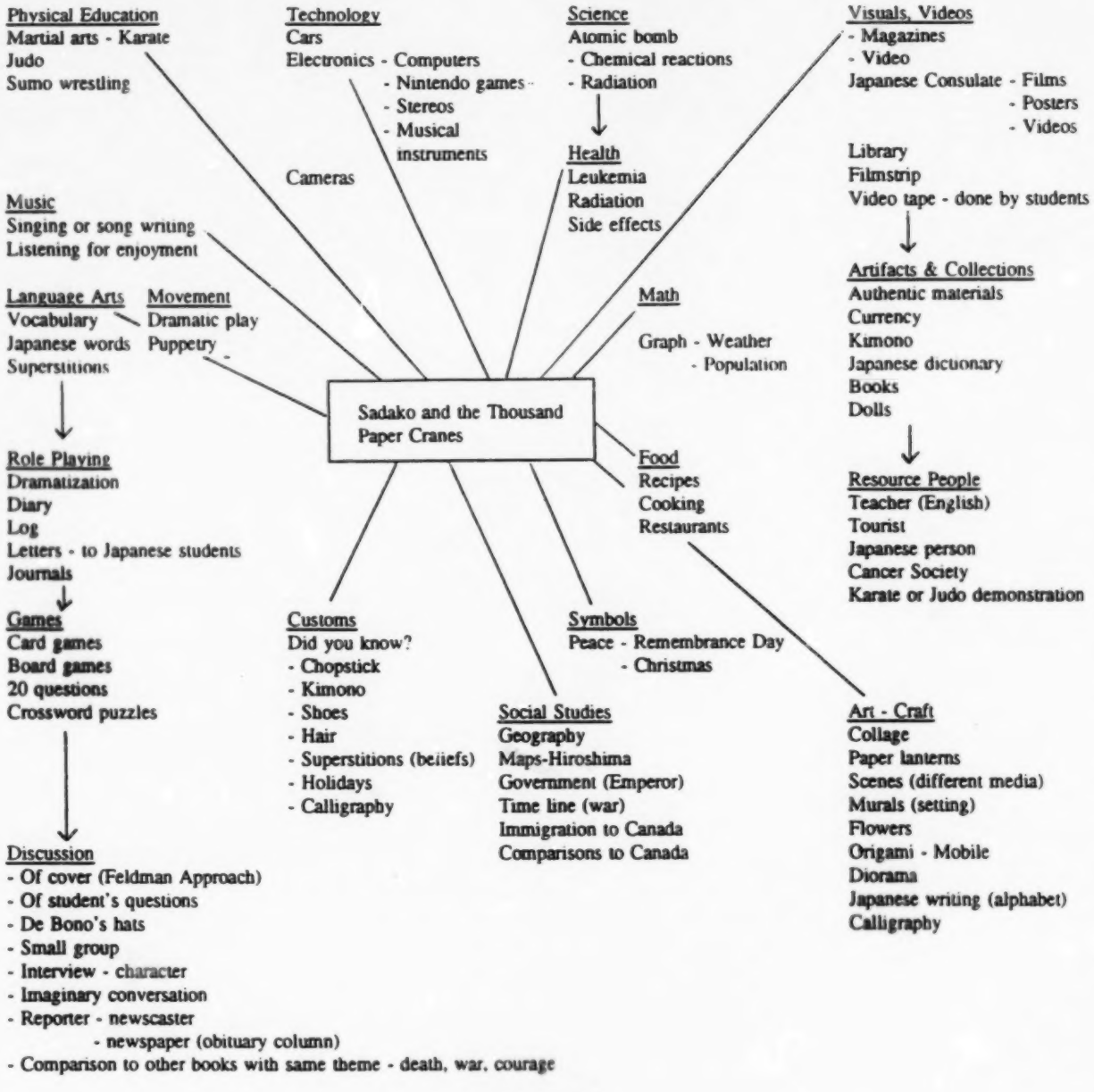

Figure 1

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About the Author

Renate Schulz teaches reading/ language arts at the Winnipeg Education Centre, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada.